What does it mean to be Free?

II Corinthians 3:1-6; 12-18
Rev. John M. Buchanan
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What does it mean to be free? There is no more important question than that today, or in any age; and the answer depends entirely on who it is who is doing the answering.

A young Marxist might say that to be free means to be rid of capitalism and the whole free-enterprise system. An African might define freedom in terms of the absence of the white man's presence, his institutions and his money. The American ghetto dweller might talk about freedom from the police or slum lords. The middle class merchant might define it as freedom to make a profit: a real estate man - to sell or not to sell to whom he pleases. Certainly the Trustees of Purdue University and the Purdue Peace Union differ when it comes to articulating what it means to be free. So would a plant manager and union steward. So would we all because to this question , as to all others, each of us brings his own personal freight, vested interests, commitments and operating assumptions.

And yet, you and I, ought to be able to express some fundamental unanimity, no matter who we are, or what our vested interests happen to be. Because you and I have voluntarily chosen to place ourselves under the discipline of discipleship to Jesus Christ, and that discipleship may, in fact, be understood almost entirely in terms of freedom.

The question of what it means to be free might be merely philosophical, just an entertaining round of intellectual gymnastics, except for the fact that it is being asked today by all sorts of people and groups of people. The Black Power advocate as well as the member of the John Birch Society; the student revolutionary and young republican: the devout Christian who throws over the Church and his brother who stays in the church - all are asking - "What does it really mean to be free?"

The disturbing thing is that we don't really seem to know, and that fact makes the quest doubly important. We are inclined sometimes to look down our social noses at those involved in the quest. Too often we dismiss an individual and the question he is asking because of his attire, or his beard or the length of his hair. And to the degree we do this, we exhibit our own lack of freedom - our own captivity to certain styles and forms. The quest is on - and we need to be part of it.

What does it mean to be free? One thing it doesn't mean is the complete absence of responsibility in the form of basic rules and regulations. It does not mean to do whatever you feel like doing whenever you feel like doing it. Absolute, philosophic freedom is called anarchy - which in fact has proven to be synonymous with chaos.

It is interesting that there are those who seriously propose this as a working definition of freedom. To effectively espouse their cause, they have an international organization of anarchists, which of course can have no rules or regulations. They met last year in Rome and spent three days arguing and fighting among themselves about who would be the leader. Anarchy just doesn't work. The assumption that men live in some predictable relationship with each other rules out totally any form of absolute freedom. Walter Lippman said it well in his little book, Preface to Morals - "We have come to see that Huxley was right when he said that a man's worst difficultires begin when he is able to do as he likes."

That, very briefly, is theNew Testament on Freedom. And from that point we can begin to answer, from a Christian vantage, the question "What does it mean to be free?"

I would begin with the church itself. When I say the Church, I mean, of course, the universal Christian Church in all its expressions. But let us not be guilty of excluding from that mystical universal body the Church as we know it best - here in the life of this congregation. If the gospel is a word of freedom, then the church ought to be supremely the one institution in society where men are free. Collectively free - the Church itself ought to be free withinsociety to be itself. But it is not, and if you think it is, you're not thinking very well.

On the contrary, the Church has allowed itself to become captive to the culture in which it find itself: that culture being overwhelmingly white and middle class. In his excellent book the Suburban Captivity of the Churches, Gibson Winter discusses the exodus of main-line Protestantism from the Ghettoes, and then issues a very ominous warning. The Church in North Africa, he points out, lived for several hundred years. And then it disappeared without a trace. "This collapse can certainly be attributed in part to the expansion of Islam; however, the core of the problem was the identification of North African Christianity with the upper social classes. The Churches became centers of upper-class culture; consequently they lacked widespread support among the people. When Islam swept across North Africa it erased Christianity. Where Christianity has become identified with upper class elites, it has lacked a substantial base in the working population and has been unable to weather social change." (p.50)

It happened a thousand year ago, because Christianity in the Church was captive to one class. It happened in Cuba, and today is heppening all over Latin America. The Church is so completely identified with and dependent upon the wealthy land-owning class that it has become almost totally estranged from the great mass of people.

Can it happen here? I would suggest that it already has. The Church is not free to be itself - consequently it has very little to say to anyone but white, middle class people. The ghettoes just aren't listening any more.

Where, for instance, did we ever get the idea that the success of a church could be measured in terms of its statistical and financial size? We got the idea, of course, from American middle class culture, which puts a great premium on statistical and financial strength. That cultural value - has become an ecclesiastical goal, and to the degree the Church reaches for it, it is just as much a captive as it would be if the government forcibly closed all its doors.

In Jesus Christ the church is free. It is free to be the kind of institution he called it to be - loving, serving, helping, healing. It doesn't have to worry about survival - God will take care of that. It has to worry only about being what Christ called it to be. If only we could understand that about ourselves: if only we could see that we are called together not to be successful - but to be faithful - if only we could exercise the freedom God gives us.

What does it mean to be free? We began with that question, and now I would pose it personally. What does it (or could it) mean to you and me to be free?

You know, I think somewhere in the back of our minds we know, or at least we have some image - some hint. I think our over-reaction to the

The Hour Strikes
Isaiah 40:1-5; 9-11
Matthew 3:1-17
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He came out of the desert, as had the people themselves, and as had their prophets time and time again in the past. He was a strange man; mad - some would have said: "a little touched" - which is one way men have always described an individual "touched" by the hand of God. He was strange, and yet compelling in a deep and irrational way. The people knew about the prophets: the prophets had been strange too. They had dressed, eaten, spoken and acted differently. But in their long history, the prophetic individual had played a major role in keeping the people in touch with the word and will of God.

So, in spite of misgivings and suspicion and fear they came out of the towns and cities to hear a man by the name of John the Baptizer. Like a prophet from centuries past he zeroed in on the facade of piety they used to disguise immorality. He told them to repent: turn around: start all over again. And as a sign and seal of this fresh beginning he invited them to join him in the Jordan River, in a ritual known as baptism. Thus, his name - John the Baptist. To Christian tradition John is important because he was a sign that something was about to happen. In the idiom of the Old Testament - he was one breaking new ground for a unique coming of God himself.

Of all the personalities presented in the pages of the Bible, John is one of the most interesting - and, in a sense, disturbing to our button-down mentality. Like the Jesus who came out to hear him, we find him at the same time compelling and repelling.

We know next to nothing about his origins. The New Testament tells us only that his mother, Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus: that his father was a priest: and that the conception of the child was a very surprising event because it happened when his parents were far beyond the ordinary, age for things like that to happen. We know, that is to say, that there was something special, something out of the ordinary, about his birth.

ethical content and the peculiar style of life.

His message was one of repentance, renewal and preparation for God's activity. In this sense it is not unlike the prophetic message of his predecessors. But John practiced Baptism, a rite common to many of the Eastern mystery religions, but within Judaism reserved soley for Gentile converts. A Jew, by birth, never in history had been baptized. A Gentile who wished to become a Jew, had to submit to circum cision sacrifice and baptism. So John, standing in the river and inviting Jews to repent and be baptized was, in effect, excommunicating the whole nation: he was saying that something so great, so important was about to happen, that nothing short of a total renewal experience was adequate as preparation. It did not, needless to say, win him friends from among the Pharises, Saduccess and Temple Priests.

The hour struck for John the Baptist, when Jesus of Nazareth appeared in the crowd one day along the banks of the river. John sensed that He was the one; said it and at Jesus request - baptized him. John maintained a following after that, was in correspondence with Jesus and his disciples - but was arrested and executed finally by the puppet king as a favor to a step-daughter.

The one who was baptized, Jesus of Nazareth, comes to the center of the stage with little more history than John. We know about his birth: we know about a trip to Jerusalem for the Passover when he was a boy and that is all. Again, educated speculation is that he grew up in a Jewish home in the town of Nazareth: that he was schooled in the Synagog: that he learned his father's trade: that he had brothers and sisters: that his father Joseph apparently died and according to custom, Jesus would have assumed responsibility for the care and support of the family.

The debate about when Jesus knew that he was the Messiah has raged for years, and often times, I think, reflects our discomfort with his manhood. A recent book suggests that he must have been married himself, and while there is no evidence for that, the suggestion does remind us of his humanity, his

by reviewing very familiar material. Let us now go deeper - and think together about the issues raised by this event. It is really one issue - a very important one - a very immediate one for your life and mine. The name of the issue is "Revelation", and the question is "Does it really happen?" "Does God do it?" - or is it all the issue of the fertile imaginations of peculiar people?

The importance of the issue is documented by the number of books in which theologians have struggled with it. In semi-academic terms it is stated this way. Is the truth of the Christian Gospel born out intellectually - in the theological, philosophical brilliance of the human mind? Or are we dealing, in the final analysis, with something so totally subjective - so intensely personal - that its truth is validated in each heart and each set of emotions?

Scholars of equal capability line up on both sides. But the real problem is that Western man stopped paying much attention to the subjective - the feeling, emotion side of things several centuries ago. The scientific method, the rational approach to every problem dragged civilization out of the middle ages and gave birth to the machine age, modern science and the age of technology. And in things religious it said "if you can't prove it, it isn't true. if you can't weigh it, measure it, analyze it, place it in a certified category, and make a scientific law out of it, it doesn't exist."

Now, you and I wouln't say it quite that way, but we are very much the children of Western civilization. As Middle Class Americans, we are very much the ultimate result of the scientific method. The very rich consult the stars: the very poor consult their emotions and empty stomachs: we consult our computers. And the effect of it all is the word "revelation" has very little meaning to the vast majority of Middle Class American Protestants. Revelation after all, is not a very scientific idea.

It is, however, a very important theological idea. Our faith is built on the idea that Almighty God, in his eternity and power, does intrude into human history at certain times and places. Correspondent to that idea is that God does intrude into the lives of individual men and women: that he reveals

they sense their own brand of revelation, we simply are not alert to the self disclosure of God when it happens right in front of our faces.

The most incredible affirmation of Christian Faith, and that which distinguishes the Judeo-Christian tradition from all the religions of the world, is that it is God's nature to disclose himself to men. And that at given points in time and space he comes into the lives of individual men and women - into, that is, your life and my life.

The word of God in all of this, it seems to me, is for Christian people to tune in - to be alive to every event, to keep eyes and ears open to the revealing of God. And when it happens, as it will, to give thanks for it: to rejoice in it: to repent and commit oneself; and to begin anew that life in the new Kingdom which it heralds.

Amen.

Our father, awaken us to your continuing revelation. Keep us from the sterility of intellectualized religion: tune our hearts and minds and senses to the miracle of your presence in the common events of our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.